



Middle-class nationalist "history"

PETER Beresford Ellis' *History of the Irish working class* was originally published in 1972 and first republished by Pluto in 1985. The arrival of a new edition, like the end of the IRA ceasefire, is a sharp reminder of how little has really changed within "the nationalist family."

This book would be better named "A nationalist history of the Irish working class" (or, "A history of the nationalist working class in Ireland"). For the author, the working class in Ireland is simply those nationalists who work. The preface to the 1985 edition states:

"The majority of the Irish working class stands clearly against Britain's colonial connection with the island but, in the north, a section of the Ulster working class, deliberately segregated from their compatriots on sectarian lines, enticed from their roots by a century and a half of propaganda, *occupy a unique place as a force of reaction and a stumbling block to social progress*. In Ireland today, as in previous centuries, the main-spring of socialism is the national struggle" [my emphasis].

This is a picture of Ireland and of its working class all too common on the British left. In fact, the work of Beresford Ellis and co-thinker Desmond Greaves can be seen as a sort of political travel guide to Ireland for 1975-1985 vintage British socialists. In a period when Ireland, and in particular the nationalist struggle, was the testing ground for militants, "England's Vietnam", many people took the new cause *célèbre* seriously enough to set about doing some reading on the matter. There is a lot to read. It is a complex history, or, to be more exact, set of histories. Busy revolutionaries were hungry for a quick summary. That is what

Beresford Ellis provides, and it has not been a proud or helpful contribution.

A generation of socialists have now been brought up on a diet of myths about Ireland. The national struggle is the main-spring of socialism (and even progress!). It is, first and foremost, an anti-imperialist struggle. Its initial nationalist stage will spill over into a broader socialist revolt, draw in Southern workers and even the best of the Protestants. Yet the Protestant working class are nothing more than the dupes and puppets of British rule, and can only be an obstacle until the inevitable nationalist victory. This diet has produced a politically malnourished left, incapable of thinking at all clearly about the issues.

Despite dealing at length with various aspects of the national struggle, on which he says very little that hasn't been said before and said better in orthodox nationalist histories, Beresford Ellis makes a passing reference to some "aspects of working class history which deserve more detail" but which he didn't have time to deal with properly. What are these aspects? In his own words: "For example: the branches of the First International in Ireland, the early history of Irish trade unionism which began in the latter part of the 18th century; the agrarian terrorist organisations of the 17th-18th centuries and the Irish soviets of 1920-3." We can tell almost as much about his standpoint from what he omits as from what he includes. It isn't that all of these aspects would be rich in examples which would challenge his basic line, it is more that they might get in the way of his linear narrative account of more or less inseparable nationalist and working class movements.

If it was a matter of time, I would suggest editing out the rosy picture painted early in the book of the egalitarian and co-operative life that was to be had in Celtic Ireland before the "crushing slavery of the Anglo-Norman feudal system." This section is mainly a defence of Connolly's attempt to establish communism as a legitimate native Irish creed. Connolly's *Labour in Irish History* was concerned to

"Gaelicise communism" as much as to "communise Ireland." It was a valiant and understandable impulse, all the more so in a Scottish immigrant and ex-British soldier constantly having to confront allegations that socialism was an alien influence peddled by outsiders. It was, nevertheless, history used selectively to deal with problems of contemporary political strategy.

To repeat and reinforce it now, without even the justification Connolly had, is to simply rationalise the surrender of so many socialists to romantic Irish nationalism. But that is part of the author's purpose.

The emergence, resilience and dynamic of Protestant working-class politics is one of the central enigmas of Irish working class history. There has been no general history which unlocks it, but the kind of account served up here simply doesn't address the problem. Most of the time, Protestants as a section of the class are simply missing ("a unique force of reaction").

Occasionally, the narrative forces the author to tread close to some really important moments. Connolly and Larkin, for example, spent a lot of time in Belfast building a union and supporting a strike movement. There were a lot of Protestants in Belfast and they were heavily involved in these strikes. At the same time, 1910-14, Connolly and Larkin were keen to organise labour politically and were in the process of establishing a labour party.

Protestants were not at all hostile to a political labour organisation. They had labour leaders such as William Walker, there had recently been a significant split in the Orange Order because of bitter working-class opposition to the Unionist bosses. The leader of the Independent Orange Order, Lindsay Crawford, shared platforms with Connolly and Larkin to ensure that the Orange card was not used to divide the class and defeat strikes.

Most of the major questions which continue to dog the Irish workers' movement came up during this period in Belfast in intense form. Was a labour party which united Protestants and Catholics possible? Would it be an

Irish labour party or a section of the newly established British Labour Party? Could the strike movements in the north, allied to the titanic battles in the south, be used to remould workers' politics on both sides, to create something independent of Green and Orange boss politics?

Beresford Ellis has to describe the 'moments' but he never seriously addresses the questions. For example, he recounts an episode when William Walker was trying to ensure that Protestant workers voted Labour and not Unionist in a local election. Walker famously declared that "Protestantism means protesting against superstition, hence true Protestantism is synonymous with labour." Walker was, in all sorts of respects, a disreputable and confused character, but here he was trying in a smaller way to do what Connolly was praised for doing with the Gaelic Catholic tradition; convince people that their cultural identity and their class feeling could be married to one another. I think they were both wrong, but where Beresford Ellis praises Connolly's vision, he condemns Walker for appealing to sectarian instincts.

Real problems of class unity are dissolved into a story of bad-dies and goodies, in which liberation for Protestant workers is only possible when they abandon their own identity but adopt the identity of the nationalist. For Beresford Ellis the real tragedy is not the final triumph of sectarian and national politics at this crucial period, it is the fact that Protestant workers failed to see that they were on the wrong side and thus consigned themselves to an historical limbo, stuck between nationalist heaven and Unionist hell.

This is not, therefore, particularly useful as a history of the working class, whose story is viewed as a subplot of the much more important history of the "Irish people" and their national war. The only reason for focusing on the working class section of that people would seem to be that they are much the better part, the fighters, the most oppressed, the more progressive. The bibliography is full of names like Farrell, Devlin, McCann; the

The American way of justice

FILM

TWO films currently on release deal with the American way of justice. The first, *Lone Star*, is a modern day western-cum-murder mystery. It tells the story of a Texas small-town sheriff, Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper), who finds himself investigating a 30 year old murder with which his dead father, a former sheriff of the same town, is connected. Deeds is forced to reassess his relationship with his father — in Deeds' words, "the fucking legend" — only to uncover secrets destined to cause him more pain. Along the way this film manages to evoke many small episodes in the history of America.

Lone Star is a wonderful, piece of cinema. Over 2½ hours various American myths and legends are represented in the characters and situations. These are poked at and gently questioned. We see the historical and contemporary conflict between Texas and Mexico; the racial divisions between whites and Mexicans, and whites and blacks. The film also reworks a central theme of the western — how the rule of the gun and saloon bar justice sometimes over-rides "normal" due process in the bourgeois criminal justice system.

Chris Cooper portrays his character — a quiet, honest, man whose face betrays the loss of his life, of his father and his childhood sweetheart — with great style.

A Time to Kill gives a very different interpretation of "the rule of the gun".

In a courtroom drama — based on a John Grisham novel — you would expect a conventional Hollywood treatment: a glaringly obvious miscarriage of justice will be put right by the handsome/beautiful, or perhaps not so handsome/beautiful but brilliant, advocate who will "bend" the rules of the bourgeois court. That message will be that bourgeois justice does work, despite its limitations. Truth will prevail.

Not here! *A Time to Kill* is

initially full of moral ambiguity. It is deeply critical of American justice and its operation in the Southern States.

A black girl is raped and savagely beaten by two rednecks. Her father, stricken with grief and anger, guns down his daughter's attackers. A young white Southern lawyer is asked to defend the father, who is up against a racist judiciary which will not allow a fair trial.

We want the father to have a fair trial because we feel sympathy for him. But, the film asks us, perfectly reasonably, do we condone an "eye for an eye" killing?

From this point, the film goes astray because this question is not asked in a sober, cool-headed way. It is given the absolute maximum dramatic and emotional underpinning. And so I had to conclude: as entertainment this movie is pretty good; as social commentary it stinks.

This film says that in certain circumstances victims are right to take the law into their own hands, that an "eye for an eye" is justified. This is no rational way to order the world. Victims should have a say in how crimes against the person are treated, but only in a general way, because the balance of probability must be that their views will not be dispassionate or, indeed, be concerned fundamentally with justice.

A Time to Kill says if a black person walks free from a racist court, after committing pre-meditated murder, that is a good thing. That is not a recipe for building an equal society, but one where the oppressed begin to aspire to the old privilege of their old oppressors.

In the end *A Time to Kill* dished up its own version of the usual Hollywood nonsense and that left me feeling queasy. The film says: despite some pretty damn big limitations, bourgeois justice does work, even for black people, even in America, even in the Southern States of America! The hundreds of black men and women mouldering in America's prisons and on death row know that to be a load of old crap.

Helen Rate

roll call of nationalist historians. Those who challenge or question that version of history, particularly its understanding of class and the Protestants (Bew, Patterson, etc.), are nowhere mentioned. A history may dispute or even dismiss these views, but not even to have read them is absurd. Beresford Ellis' history is one that assumes that it is the truth, that allows for no serious doubts. In that, as in many other ways, it has the unmistakable stamp of Catholicism.

If this book is useful, it is as a case study of the history of the Irish question dominant on the left in Britain. If we are to challenge the strategy proposed by that left, then we need to challenge their history.

Patrick Murphy
History of the Irish working class
by Peter Beresford Ellis, Pluto

Vindication of a life

NEXT YEAR is the 200th anniversary of the death of Mary Wollstonecraft. She died at 38, while giving birth to her second daughter, only five years after the publication of her most famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The infant girl who lost her mother at birth was also named Mary. She went on to become a writer — the creator of Frankenstein — and married the poet Percy Shelley. Wollstonecraft's first daughter, Fanny, committed suicide at the age of 22 years.

In *Vindication* Frances Sherwood takes the facts of her heroine's life and weaves them together with fictional day-to-day events and feelings, describing relationships, bodies, emotions, landscapes and incidents in imaginative and vivid detail. The Wollstonecraft Sherwood creates takes on an apparently mythical stature, yet, because she remains profoundly human, she continuously lets herself down.

Reading *Vindication* is an incredible experience — once the story is in your head, it's hard to get it out. This is a novel of great highs and terrible lows for the reader. It is exhilarating, inspiring, passionate, exciting and also, in parts, gory, vulgar, horrifyingly shocking and sad.

Mary's life was, of course, one

of great highs and lows, all of which are here.

The highs and the thrills of of this book are the many achievements of Mary's life, her feminism, her intellectual abilities and her strength to survive in spite of a broken heart and a battered spirit.

And the lows, the cruelties? We see Mary's harsh childhood, saved only by her relationship with her friend Fanny; we read of Mary's insecurities, self-doubt and the sadness of her losses; we see her inadequacies as a mother and her failings as a lover.

Mary is shipwrecked on the way to Portugal to see her dearest friend Fanny on her deathbed. She travels to France during the revolution, has a love affair with Gilbert, the father of her first child Fanny, and subsequently escapes from Paris and the guillotine. Mary is later betrayed by Gilbert. This part of the story left me feeling exhilarated, inspired, sad and depressed all at once! And the forceful and striking depiction of Mary's stay in the lunatic asylum, Bedlam, her attempted suicide and depression left me feeling impotent and useless.

High emotion is relieved by the many amusing scenes. Sherwood describes Mary's friendship with the artist and poet William Blake and his wife Catherine and her first visit to the Blakes' printshop and home in Lambeth. Blake's eccentricities — including naturism and vegetarianism — provide plenty of scope for easy amusement. But Sherwood's description will have you laughing out loud — wherever you may be. Sherwood's Blake is so wild you will just have to find out more about him. (For a passionate, though not so amusing account of Blake's life, Peter Ackroyd's biography *Blake* is well worth reading).

This novel will not change your life, but it will enhance it. *Vindication* is not a "woman's" novel. If you happen to be a man, don't deprive yourself of a stormy and thrilling adventure just because the hero is a woman and a feminist. Mary's philosopher husband, William Godwin, wrote his memoirs of Mary a few months after her death. On reviewing the memoirs, the bourgeois press described Godwin as a pimp and Mary as a whore. Their hatred of Mary Wollstonecraft gives us just the tiniest glimpse of the impact, the subversiveness and the importance of her published works.

Jill Mountford
Vindication by Frances Sherwood, Phoenix, 1994, £6.99